

nUGGET

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ENTERTAINMENT
IN A
LIGHTER
MOOD



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community affair

It was agreed that Sigvard's problem should be shared by everyone—only Sigvard's problem was his wife

by Jack Ritchie

LARSE Peterson get to his feet and look around table. "I see Sigvard is too weak to come to meeting of township board tonight. This make it good time to discuss what we can do about his trouble. Is there any women present?"

"No women, Larse," Dr. Thorsen say. "But, Nels, take look at door. Maybe kids is listening."

I look down hall. "It is all clear, Doctor."

Larse wait until I come back. "We of town board know this terrible situation. Sigvard does not get enough sleep, even if he is in bed all the time."

Augmund scratch his head and look at Dr. Thorsen, who is chairman of board. "Do I put this matter in minutes?"

Dr. Thorsen take time to think. "It is true this is medical problem, but I think it is township business too. Put down what we decide. It is possible some day I write paper for medical journal and I will need notes."

Larse put his knuckles on table and lean forward. "Yesterday Sigvard come to boat at seven o'clock. By this time we should be out three hours and have let down nets."

It take two men to run fishing boat. I cannot do this job alone. I lose two, three hours every day because of what that woman expect from my partner."

Gustaaf Kronquist nod. "I have seen with my own eyes. She wait for Sigvard at door when he come home and she have this woman's gleam in her eyes. I do not believe he even get his supper first."

Larse has sadness in his voice. "Fifteen pounds Sigvard has lost and he is married but one month. This is not because his supper is late." He look us over again. "On this island, we got fish cooperative. We got dairy cooperative. We got electric cooperative."

We sit and think about cooperatives and then Gustaaf sit up straight and color leave his face. "Larse!" he say. "What are you thinking? We must draw line somewhere!"

Larse has stubborn look. "We are community and we must cooperate. What is Sigvard's trouble is our trouble."

Gustaaf get out of chair. "Larse, this is your trouble. It is for you alone to solve."

Larse shake his head. "This I cannot do for I am away on boat with Sigvard all day. Also I am too old." He look

at rest of us. "You, Gustaaf, are keeper of tavern. You are young man of forty and bachelor. You are on island when Sigvard is gone. And you, Nels, are also bachelor and twenty-five. You are on island all day long too."

I consider this and then point to Augmund. "He is bachelor and he does not leave island."

Little Augmund get red and look down at table.

"Augmund is over fifty," Larse say. "Also he is not big man. We leave him out of this. He will keep records."

Gustaaf scratch ear and is uncertain. "Perhaps it is better to get outside help. We are men with reputation in community. Maybe we ask somebody like Asvor Helstaadt."

"No," Dr. Thorsen say. "Asvor is engaged. Beside, he is getting married sooner than he think."

"This is question of Sigvard's life," Larse say. "I do not think he can last much longer."

Dr. Thorsen look at Gustaaf. "You have given us many stories of your powers with chambermaids when you go to St. Paul for vacation."

Gustaaf blush, but he is pleased. "It is not lie." He shrug shoulders. "Perhaps I can help Sigvard get rest."

Dr. Thorsen's eyes come to me. "And you, Nels?"

I am surprised. "What? Is not one man enough?"

He look at ceiling. "No. You have my word." Then he pound table with gavel. "Nels and Gustaaf, you are now special committee to save Sigvard's life. Good luck."

Augmund sigh and take out clean piece of paper. "I will make schedule."

"One thing," I say. "We do not know if Dagna is willing."

Dr. Thorsen light his cigar. "This is something I would not worry about."

It turn out that I am Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Gustaaf is Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. On Sundays Sigvard does not fish.

When sun come up on Monday, I am waiting at window of my bedroom. I see other fishermen drive to dock, but I do not see Sigvard.

I think back to time when Dagna and I are in same grade in school. I remember when we have school picnic and get lost in woods. After that we get lost even during recess.

I go outside of house and walk around yard for a while and watch road. Some cars go by, but still no Sigvard. When I go back inside of house, it is only six o'clock.

My mother come down from upstairs. She shake her head. "You have fever. I see redness in face."

"It is sunburn."

My father come into kitchen rubbing his chin. "Since we cannot sleep, let us eat breakfast."

I have just finished eggs and bacon when I hear car and go to window. "It is Sigvard!" I say, and my voice squeak.

My father look at my mother. She shrug her shoulders. "I do not know what is wrong with him either."

When I put on jacket and go to door, my father raise his eyebrows. "You open garage at seven in morning?"

"I do not open garage," I say. "I drive around island for a while. Maybe I look at birds and bees." I think this over for a second. "I will look at birds and flowers."

At turn to North Road I almost go into ditch because I am driving so fast. I slow down and in five minutes I turn into driveway of Sigvard's house. I turn off ignition, and am thinking of how this matter must be approached when door of house open and Dagna come out.

She smile. "Ah, Nels. It is nice morning."

"You bet," I say. "I have come to look at oil leak in Sigvard's car."

"Sigvard's car is at dock. He left not long ago."

I click my tongue. "It is pity to have missed him."

Dagna study me and she smile wider. "It is very early Nels. You come in and have cup of breakfast coffee with me."

Inside of house, Dagna pour cups of coffee. "It is long time since I see you, Nels."

"You have married," I say.

She keep smiling. "I do not think this should change everything too much. We are still old friends, are we not?"

I agree quickly. "That is right, Dagna. We have had many interesting times together."

She push her coffee cup aside. Her eyes have meaning. "Do you remember picnic?"

"I have not forgotten recesses either," I say.

We do not finish our coffee.

At two-thirty in afternoon we remember that Sigvard will be back. I dress fast and run for car. On North Road, I pass Sigvard coming back from docks.

He wave and I wave back. He look like he need sleep. I think this night he will get it.

When I return to garage, my father stop working on Anderson's truck and wipe grease from hands. "So? You have decided to work some today?"

"It is true I am a little late," I say. "But day was so fine for looking at island. Many birds and flowers." I get into my shop overalls. "I go to work right now."

He look at my feet. "Tie shoe laces first."

On Wednesday, Sigvard's car go down to docks at six in morning and by six-fifteen I am at Dagna's. When she open door, she is wearing dressing gown. Just dressing gown.

I do not get to the garage until three o'clock. "I will work tonight," I tell my father.

He shake his head. "It is Wednesday and movie night. Always you take Svanhild to see picture."

This is true. For two years I take Svanhild to movie. She never go into woods unless other people with us, and even then she carry compass.

(Continued on next page)



After supper I take her to movies and I almost fall asleep. When picture is over, I drive her back home. There is moonlight all over and I yawn. "Good night, Svanhild."

She tilt her head and look at me. "You are sick, Nels?" "I am not sick," I say. "Why does whole damn island think I am sick?"

"Do not get mad, Nels." She meet my eyes. "All through movie you do not get fresh once. Even on way back, you do not stop car on Olson Road and say it is time I come across."

"You want me to be gentleman," I say. "Fine. I become gentleman."

"But, Nels. This does not mean you must give up trying altogether."

I sigh. "Good night, Svanhild. I have hard days ahead." Sigvard begin to go to docks earlier. When I see him, he look like he is gaining weight.

At end of three weeks, he come to garage to have bearing on his car changed. When I finish job, he reach in his pocket and bring out wallet.

I wave hand. "That is all right, Sigvard. You are good customer. Job is on house."

He put wallet back in his pocket and scratch head. "This is funny day. When I go to Gustaaf for case of beer, he say this is on house too." He smile. "It is good to live in community with so generous people."

When he leave, I go to have short beer at Gustaaf's. He rub eyes and grin. "Ah, Nels. Tomorrow is Wednesday and it is your turn." He poke me on arm.

"And next day is Thursday and it is your turn."

We both laugh and then we yawn.

On Wednesday I do not get to Dagna's place until eight-thirty. She stand in doorway tapping foot. "Every day you come later and later."

"Work at shop make me need sleep."

She look at me for a little while, then she smile and glow come back into her eyes. She move closer to me.

"Dagna," I say. "Can we never play cards for change?"

She shake her head. "At cards, I am not so good."

Two days later when it is my turn again, I drive toward Dagna's house. When I come to driveway, I slow down. Then I coast right by and step on gas.

My father raise his eyebrows when he see me park car at garage. "Is this not birdwatching day?"

"All birds gone," I say. "They fly south."

At nine-thirty, when I am working on carburetor of Johnson's tractor, the phone ring. It is luck that I am one who answers, for it is Dagna.

She have ice in voice. "You have perhaps forgotten?"

"Oh?" I say. "I did not remember today is Friday."

"You are reminded."

"I have big job to do on Johnson's tractor."

She tell me to do something to Johnson's tractor which is impossible.

When I go to my car, my father look at the sky. "Birds is back?"

In the evening when I finish supper at home, I go to the couch where I think I will take nap before it is time for town board meeting.

"Do not take off shoes yet," my mother say. "Svanhild will be here soon."

I close my eyes. "This is not Wednesday."

"She is not coming for date. She want serious talk with you."

I open my eyes, but my mother has gone back to kitchen. In a little while I hear Model A which belong to Svanhild come into our driveway.

When Svanhild enter, she sit down on easy chair. "You

lose weight, Nels. You do not eat good?"

"I eat good. When I have time."

She look at me and blush a little. "You have been strange for last month. You have not been free with hands and you no longer try to break my compass."

"I have many other things to think about."

She meet my eyes. "Is this because of something I have done?"

I take long sigh. "No, Svanhild."

She get a little red. "Is this then because of something I have not done?"

She get redder and look down at floor: "It is difficult to decide. Some women say that only way to hold man's interest is not to . . ." She clear throat and skip a word. "Until after marriage." Then she frown. "And other women say that only way to hold man's interest is to . . ." She skip same word again. "Before marriage."

Svanhild is silent for half a minute. "Nels, because I do not get lost in woods, this does not mean that I am . . ." She get red again. "This does not mean that I am what magazine article call frigid." She look down at hands. "Also, Nels, I do not think that I am . . ." She cannot go on.

"Hot," I say. "Like cat on tin roof." I think about this and feel very tired.

She look up. "That is it, Nels. I think I am normal like anything and this is a problem. What should I do, Nels? Should I go into woods before marriage?"

I rub my chin. "We do not make immediate decision. I must have week to rest."

Svanhild have puzzle in her eyes. I get up and pat her on head. "I mean that I must have week to think about this."

At seven-thirty I go for meeting of board. Sigvard is not there and this surprise me a little for he should be well rested and interested in community affairs. Larse have big smile on his face. "I wish to introduce resolution for record to commend special committee of Gustaaf and Nels for work they do for island."

Just then Sigvard walk through door. "I am sorry to be late, he say. "But I have flat tire." He sit down and look at Gustaaf and me. "What work? What committee?"

Larse look at Dr. Thorsen for help. Dr. Thorsen study his gavel for long ten seconds before he think of something. "For work Gustaaf and Nels do coaching baseball team."

Sigvard smile and nod. "I second resolution."

When resolution is passed, Sigvard get to his feet. "Resolutions is good," he say. "And this remind me. I move we give medal every year to man who do most for community. We call this Community Service Medal."

No one object and so we vote to give medal every year.

Augmund take off his glasses and polish them. Then he wipe forehead of sweat. "I move we adjourn meeting."

I stand up. "One moment. I wish to make announcement that I retire from special committee. I must do so because I have decided to marry Svanhild."

Sigvard smile. "First month of marriage you have no time for anything else. But things calm down. You have time for baseball then, Nels." He wink at me. "I know."

Gustaaf sit up. "I make announcement too. I resign from special committee also. I marry widow Bergen."

Sigvard look at him with surprise. "Widow Bergen is almost fifty."

"Prime of life." Gustaaf say. "And she is good cook. I think this has more importance than other things."

Larse put his head on the table. "I think I sell my share of boat."

Sigvard get to his feet. "I will volunteer for special

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of rock. It was like fire burning, the water was so cold. I opened my mouth to shriek, and then clamped it on the saw again as it began to slip, a mouthful of liquid ice burning and gagging in my throat. Down and down. Something brushed my leg and I knew what death was like. I swept my hands around, almost forgetting why I was there, filled with terror, with panic, nothing in my mind, my heart, my body, but fear. And when I touched the line it was salvation that I touched, not rescue. Something floating. Rolf.

I felt for the hacksaw as if I was dreaming, and wrenched at the wet nylon. It was like cutting pliant steel. I felt my lungs bursting and instead of blackness I could see blood; red blood like a curtain under my eyelids. A thread gave and another, and there was a sudden feeling of lifting, of shooting upwards through layer upon layer of pain. And then I was breathing air. I opened my eyes and saw the beam of the torch slanting from where I had laid it down, barely ten feet away. Beside me, Rolf's body floated, half lit by the beam, half in darkness. I pushed it in front of me like a raft, and clung for a long minute to the ledge. Then up, clawing him after me by the sodden collar of his shirt.

I don't know how long it took. Maybe half a minute. Maybe an hour. But at the end of it we lay side by side on the rock, and I could hear the sound of the water in his throat as he tried to breathe. I crawled on top of him, pressing behind his lungs, lifting, pressing.

"Live, you bastard," I was whispering. "Live." Until he was breathing. "Now lie there," I said. "I'm going to fetch more rope. Try and hold the torch for me while I climb."

It was as if I was climbing back out of hell. I'm afraid to sleep some nights in case I should dream of it; that thread of a crevice that hardly held my finger tips; the smoothness of the rock and my feet slipping, slipping everytime I tried for a foothold. Climbing until the fibers burned in my shoulders, and I could hear the ligaments crack. And the beam of the torch wavering, slipping away and back again as Rolf tried to hold it. Thirty feet. Forty. And the memory of Rolf screaming as he fell. Until I felt a sudden nothing as my fingers reached upwards, and I was at the lip of the tunnel. I lay on it for maybe five minutes before I had even the strength to call down to Rolf that I was there.

Twenty minutes later I was at the truck, getting the spare line and another torch. And blankets, because I was almost naked. I'd torn my clothes into strips to mark the way at each fork in the tunnel. Then back for Rolf, and the agony of pulling him up the cliff face with arms that had already wrenched every muscle in them. Pulling him up inch by inch the line belayed round the spike, and his weight hanging on the end like a sack of gold. I dream about that too, and it is gold that I'm pulling to the surface. And I can see my own face as I work, greed in it like an animal in a cage, until I wake screaming. Rolf always comes to me then.

Getting him over the lip of the tunnel was the worst. I had to tie the line round my own waist, and trust both our weights to the spike, while I lay on my stomach on the slope and heaved and struggled to get him up that last foot of rock. When it was done, and we had crawled back up the tunnel as far as the spike, I found it was bent until it was almost flat to the ground. It's hard to know what held the line in those last minutes.

I don't remember how we got back to the mouth of the cave. Only the moonlight. And the shapes of the rocks. And the pure cold of the air. It was like life itself, after the death's coldness of the cave. It was only then that I looked at Rolf. He looked back at me, half-smiling, and yet whimpering at the same time, his mouth shaping itself for little, helpless sounds. He was quite mad. □ □ □

COMMUNITY AFFAIR

(Continued from page 60)

service committee. I am much interested in baseball."

On Monday, after breakfast, I go to garage with my father. Dagna does not call garage, but it is not until three in afternoon when I know that Sigvard has returned from fishing that I become at ease.

When we close garage, I go across road to Gustaaf's Tavern. I sit on stool in front of him. "On Saturday, did you go to Dagna's?"

He shake head. "No. And she did not phone either."

Three weeks go by and one day Larse come to garage. He seem very cheerful and this puzzle me. "How is things, Larse?" I ask.

"Fine," he say. "Sigvard has not been late to boat yet."

I scratch my head. "I do not understand this."

He shrug his shoulders. "I do not either, but I do not question. I leave things alone."

It is the next afternoon when phone ring. It is Dagna. "Nels," she say. "Come here quick. This is emergency."

I take moment to think. It has been three weeks. A man can recover. It is true Svanhild has lost her compass, but on other hand we are not yet married. I look at clock and see that it is almost two. "It will be close thing, Dagna," I say. "But I will hurry."

I jump into car and race into her driveway on two wheels but must slam on brakes, for there is another car. When dust settle, I see Dagna and little Augmund on lawn. I stare and point to car in front of me. "This is your car, Augmund?"

He is very nervous. "Damn battery does not work. Close big mouth and fix."

Dagna wring her hands. "Hurry, Nels. Make Augmund's car move."

I am in daze, but I get out and look at Augmund's car. His battery is dead and also engine is flooded. I shake head. "I do not have extra battery with me. I did not think I would need it."

Augmund's voice get very high. "Then push with your car, Nels. Push!"

I push Augmund's car onto main road and this does not happen too soon. Sigvard's car come around bend and he wave to us as he go by.

After quarter of mile, Augmund's car start and he take off like bat from hell. I follow him and he go straight to Gustaaf's Tavern. He is drinking whiskey with shaking hand when I walk into place.

"You, Augmund?" I ask. "You?"

He put out jaw. "So? Why not me? I am bachelor. I am member of town board."

I look him over. "You alone?"

He rub fingernails on coat. "Every day, but not Sunday."

I close eyes for moment. "But Augmund," I say. "You are so little. You have so thin shoulders."

He smile at me like I am child. "Nels," he say. "This is not matter of shoulders."

On Labor Day, before last baseball game of season, we have ceremony and present Island Service Medal to Augmund.

When ball game start, Sigvard sit next to me and shake his head. "It is not that I am poor loser. But I have coached island baseball team to first pennant in twenty-two years, but Service Medal is given to Augmund."

"Maybe next year, Sigvard," I say.

I look at Augmund and it is hard to believe. He is gaining weight. □ □ □